



Teaching with Historic Places: Keeping with the Routine: African American Workers in the Bathhouses at Hot Springs, Arkansas

“All bathhouse attendants bathe their persons every day. When they report for duty in the morning, they disrobe and put on a bathing suit of white duck trousers and a thin gauze undershirt; their duties require them to work in a temperature of from 95 to 100 degrees and as a natural consequence their suits become saturated with perspiration in a short time, which detracts from their personal appearance. Being a hazardous business and destructive of health, white men shun this work and it follows that the Negro is the natural bath attendant. So far as their work is concerned, it compares favorably with other laborers of this grade of intelligence.”

Letter to U.S. Secretary of the Interior, August 28, 1903

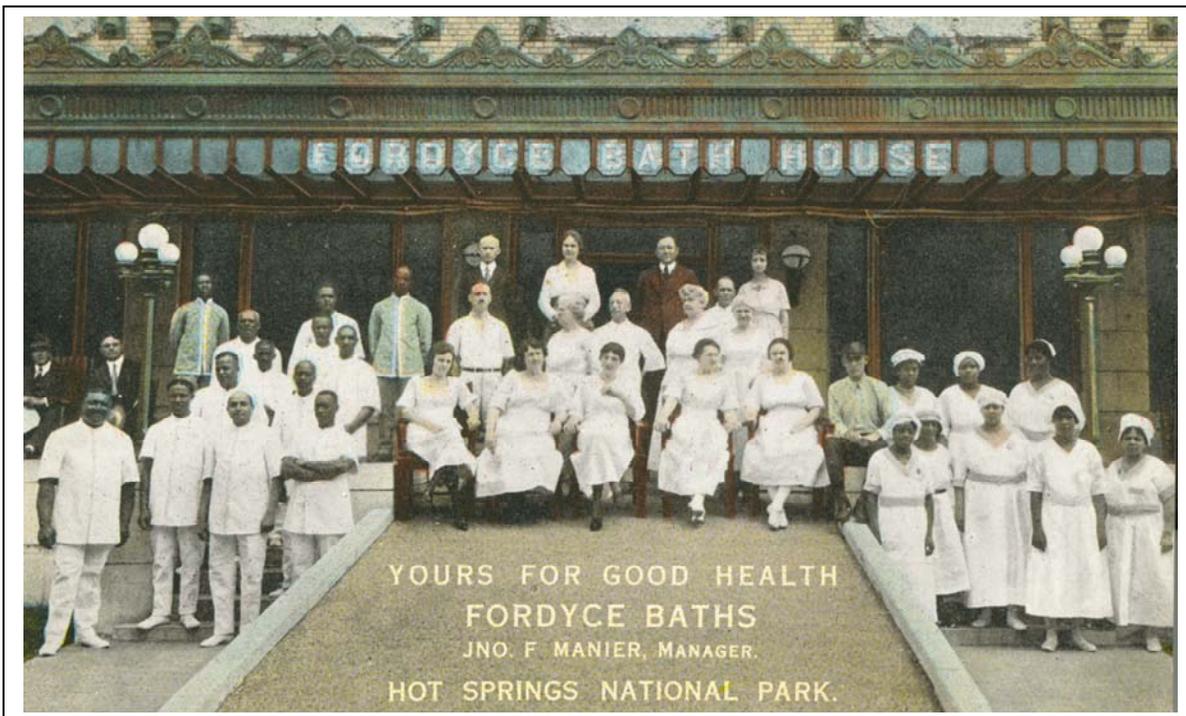


Image courtesy of Deborah Phillips-Carroll

I. Introduction to the Lesson:

For hundreds of years, people have recognized the uniqueness of Hot Springs, Arkansas, and the thermal waters that flow from the base of Hot Springs Mountain. Both American Indians and European settlers bathed in the waters. They were so popular that the Arkansas Territorial Legislature approached the United States government in 1820 to preserve this unique national resource and preserve it for the use of the public. As a result, the hot and cold springs and adjoining mountains were set aside as a federal reservation in 1832 after President Andrew Jackson signed legislation to set aside "...four sections of land including said (hot) springs, reserved for the future disposal of the United States (which) shall not be

entered, located, or appropriated, for any other purpose whatsoever." This 1832 legislation is the earliest known example of any hot springs being set aside by the federal government specifically for public benefit.

After Hot Springs Reservation was firmly established as government property in 1877, the area rapidly changed from a rough frontier town to an elegant spa city, with building, landscaping, and engineering projects proceeding apace. Bathhouses for the public were the main feature of the spring area and were regulated by a "superintendent." Each new generation of buildings was larger and more luxurious than the previous one. Roads and paths were improved for the convenience of visitors who wished to enjoy the scenery. Bath attendants administered the thermal waters to visitors – most of these attendants were African American until the late 20th century. Their jobs varied between cleaning the bathhouses to giving mercury treatments to ailing bathers. This lesson looks at the African American bath attendants that worked on Bathhouse Row in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

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II. About This Lesson

This lesson is based on actual historic events that occurred along Bathhouse Row in Hot Springs National Park, Hot Springs, Arkansas. Each bathhouse is on the National Register of Historic Places and as a group are a part of the Bathhouse Row National Historic Landmark District. Materials used to create this lesson include the National Register of Historic Places, "Teaching with Historic Places" format; *The Hot Springs of Arkansas Through the Years: A Chronology of Hot Springs Events* by Sharon Shugart, Museum Specialist, Hot Springs National Park (2002); *Out of the Vapors: A Social and Architectural History of Bathhouse Row* by John C. Paige and Laura Soulliere Harrison, National Park Service; African

Americans and the Hot Springs Baths on CD-ROM by Hot Springs National Park; oral history collection of Hot Springs National Park.

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Curriculum Tie:

Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)

Objectives for Students:

- To understand the impact of legal segregation on job options in the African American community.
- To discuss the role of African American bath attendants at Hot Springs National Park bathhouses.
- To evaluate and use oral histories when telling the story of a historic site.
- To use the analysis of photographs to tell the story of a historic site.

Materials for Students:

Map of Hot Springs, Arkansas

Images of Bath Attendants at Hot Springs, Arkansas

Oral Recollections of Alfred Peppers and Claudine Adams, Bath Attendants

Visiting the Site:

Hot Springs National Park and Gulpha Gorge Campground are open year round. The visitor center in the historic Fordyce Bathhouse is open daily 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. except on Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day. Contact the national park by phone at (501) 620-6715 or write Hot Springs National Park, 101 Reserve Street, Hot Springs Arkansas 71901. The web site for the national park is www.nps.gov/hosp.

III. Teaching Activities

Getting Started:

View the image of the bath attendant at a bathhouse in Hot Springs. Share with your classmate your perception of the African American bath attendant and their work. Make a list of their possible work habits, their tasks, hours of work, discrimination and segregation, etc. Revise the list when you have completed the lesson to include correct information on African American employment at the bathhouses of Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Examine the photograph of the bather and bath attendant at Hot Springs in 1934. What feelings do you think both persons in the photograph are having towards the bath, their experience with one another, and their races? Discuss student answers in the classroom before beginning the lesson.



After the Civil War ended in 1865, African Americans found that, although they were freed from slavery, many were not free to work where they wanted. They searched for jobs that would provide money for their families and most of the time, they had to take jobs that were physically grueling and had long hours. In the case of the bathhouses on Hot Springs Reservation (later National Park), African American women and men served primarily as laundresses and bath attendants as early as the 1870s. This policy of hiring African Americans to serve as attendants continued until the 1980s. As attendants, they had specific duties, including cleaning the bathing areas within the bathhouses, helping invalids, washing patients' bathrobes, and rubbing mercury into the skin of patients. All of these duties were expected to be performed cheerfully and with their own supplies that they purchased until 1910, when the government issued regulations that changed their work descriptions. However, they were still assigned to clean bathhouses by the managers. When the bathhouses faced financial difficulties, the first employees laid off or cut in wages were not the whites, but African Americans. If they broke equipment, they had to pay for the repairs themselves.

African American attendants at the Hot Springs bathhouses received a standard paycheck by 1881...they could make up to \$1.00 per week! These service fees were paid by the bathers themselves to the attendants. By the 1890s, the pay for African American bathing attendants was raised to a fixed salary of \$10 per week as per the superintendent of the Hot Springs Reservation. They could receive additional pay by giving more than 10 baths per week. For many, this was a very good salary and a steady job.

What did they do at the bathhouses? In the 20th century, bathhouse attendants were given courses on physiology of the human body, hygiene, and first aid. They had to pass tests and be observed working in order to stay employed. The attendants giving massages to bathers were called a “masseur” (male) or “masseuse” (females), terms used until the 1960s when they were called “massage therapists.” One of the first African American “masseurs” and “masseuses” was James Truman, who began working at the Arlington Hotel Bathhouse in 1922, and Estella Hughey, who worked at the Majestic Hotel in 1926. Because the only school for massage training in the country at that time was the Kellberg Institute of Massage in Chicago, Illinois, not many African Americans could afford to train for massage.

For some patients suffering from venereal disease, a prescription of mercury was given. The African American bath attendants often applied this toxic rub with a glove or brush to the bather. The bath attendants also divided the men and women up into separate dressing rooms, helping them to disrobe and covering them with a sheet or towel. The African American bath attendants also cleaned the public areas of the building.

In general, African American bathhouse attendants were exploited in a variety of ways compared to their white counterparts. In some instances, they were pressured to vote for certain candidates in local and state elections – a common practice in the years following the Civil War when manipulating ballot boxes was the norm. When these offenses were committed, the superintendents of Hot Springs Reservation often issued rules and regulations to try and stop them. Another offense bathhouse managers committed was forcing African Americans to work on Sundays. In 1891, many local church pastors lobbied to stop this practice, but it did not end until well into the 20th century.

A change of the work force arrived in the early 1900s when whites were given permission to become bathhouse attendants along Bathhouse Row. In 1911, permission was granted to hire white bath attendants at the Buckstaff Bathhouse. The reason given for the hiring of white rather than African Americans was typical of segregation-era thinking, “We believe that the white attendant position will not only give us a higher standard of intelligence, but will improve the service in many other ways.” By 1913, the Buckstaff had an entirely white attendant staff, and Hot Springs Reservation approved of allowing other bathhouses to hire whites as well. In fact, the Buckstaff advertised itself to those who only wanted white attendants! Despite these changes, the bath attendants remained primarily African American until the mid-20th century. In this sense, the federal government promoted the segregation policies of early 1900s America.

Locating the Site:

- Locate Hot Springs, Arkansas, on a map of Arkansas.
- Locate the Ouachita Mountains on a map of Arkansas.
- Locate Bathhouse Row on a map of Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Determining the Facts:

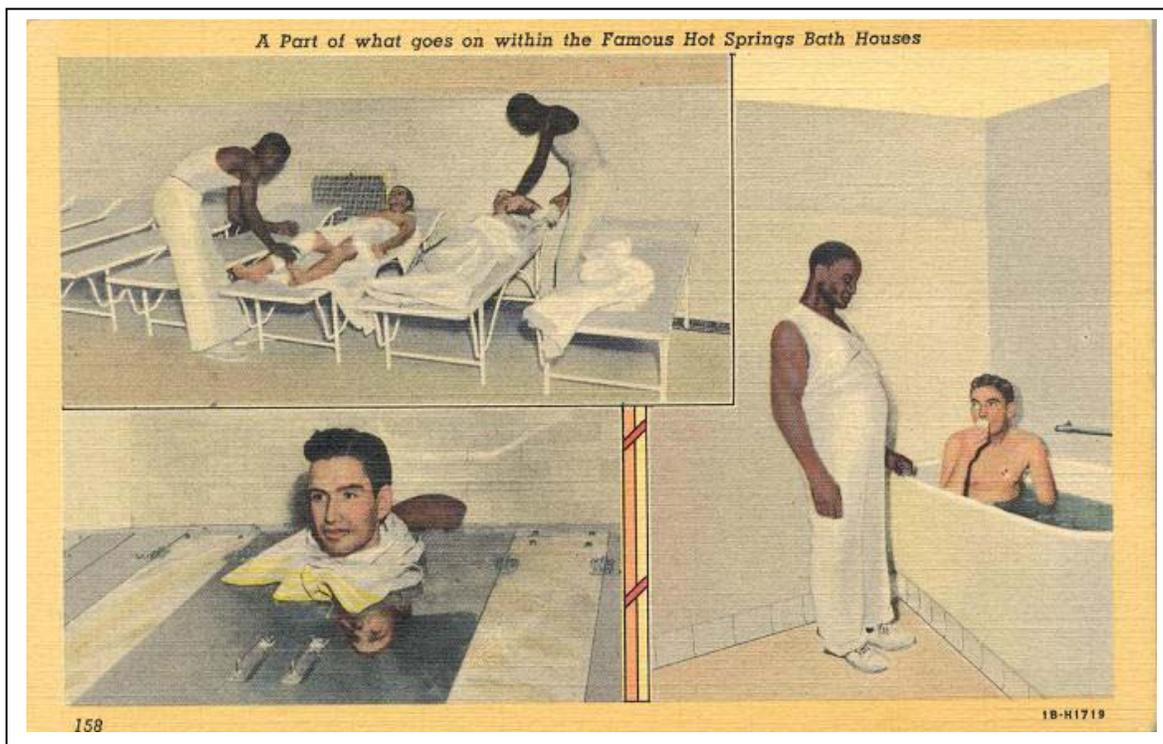
Read the oral recollections of attendants Alfred Pepper and Claudine Adams who worked in various bathhouses in Hot Springs during the mid-20th century. When finished, answer the following questions based on the oral recollections:

- 1) According to the oral interviews, who worked in the bathhouses?
- 2) What jobs were given to African Americans who worked in the bathhouses?
- 3) Was segregation prevalent in the bathhouses? Give specific examples cited by Mr. Pepper and Ms. Adams.
- 4) What rationale do you think people had to visiting the same bath attendant when they came to Hot Springs? How were the attendants rewarded for their services?
- 5) In your opinion, did segregation hurt the professional and economic development of those working in the bathhouses?

Visual Evidence:

After reading or reviewing the Getting Started section of this lesson, look at the following photos of Hot Springs, Arkansas and its bathhouses. Interpret the story of African American employment at the bathhouses using the following questions:

- 1) What is segregation?
- 2) Chart how the work of the African American bath attendants at Hot Springs changed over time (between the late 1800s and mid- 20th century)? Give examples of their jobs and how these jobs evolved over time.
- 3) How were African Americans segregated from whites in terms of employment at the bathhouses?
- 4) In your opinion, what would have been fair employment for African Americans working at the bathhouses?



- 1) What was the difference between the National Baptist bathhouse and the Buckstaff Bathhouse in terms of employment of African Americans?
- 2) What were the qualifications of employment for African Americans and whites at the bathhouses?
- 3) In your opinion, what do you think about administering baths to people who were seriously ill? How do you think bath attendants felt about it based on your previous reading of bathhouse history?
- 4) Physically, how do you think many bathhouse attendants felt after a long day of work and what type of environment do you think they worked in every day?
- 5) How do you think the African American bath attendants felt when the Buckstaff Bathhouse advertised “White Attendants. This Means Service”?



Putting it All Together:

- 1) Investigate recreational industries/businesses near your home that functioned in the past or present. Through a visual display, document its history. Were minority workers employed?
- 2) Present information related to the bathhouse industry in the United States to a group of people (adults or fellow students) that shows how the policies towards minority employees has changed over time. Utilize sources from historic sites and bathhouses that are currently open in your research.
- 3) Conduct oral histories in your community that document how minorities have been employed in the past in local businesses and if segregation existed.

Supplementary Resources:

- 1) Hot Springs National Park: www.nps.gov/hosp
- 2) African American History in Arkansas: [//arkedu.state.ar.us/africanamerican/arkres.htm](http://arkedu.state.ar.us/africanamerican/arkres.htm)
- 3) Warm Springs, Georgia: www.warmspringsga.com
- 4) National Register for Historic Places: www.cr.nps.gov/nr/

Oral Recollection of Alfred Peppers

March 24, 1999 (this oral history is in the collection of Hot Springs National Park)

Mr. Peppers was a bath attendant at the National Baptist, Pythian, Superior, and Lamar Bathhouses in the mid 20th century.

Interviewer: What occupation [were you]?

Mr. Peppers: Well, some days are slow, some days are hectic, and some days are real good.

Interviewer: Could you tell me the routine, your job duty as bath attendant?

Mr. Peppers: ...It was a regular routine of any bathhouse...be there at seven. No, you start at seven, and you off at 11:30, 12 o'clock for an hour break, and you come back and work till three o'clock, and the routine, is, well, they go to the dressing room, come down with a sheet or towel or a robe, sit in the waiting room, wait for their number to be called, and after that, they go into the tub and stay unless they have a direction [doctor prescription], to stay as long as the directions don't keep them on the average about 15-20 minutes, take them out. Put them back in the pack room, pack them, send them up to the cooling room, then if they desire a massage, the masseuse or the masseur takes care of them (note: the masseurs were white employees).

Interviewer: How has the bathing business changed during the years that you've worked? Do you think it's different, or has it slowed down...?

Mr. Peppers: Well, it has practically stopped with the exception of the hotels.

Interviewer: Do you remember the year when you first started in the bathhouse[s]?

Mr. Peppers: 1952.

Interviewer: Did the superintendent and staff come around the bathhouses to check?

Mr. Peppers: Yes, they did...

Interviewer: Could you tell me what they were looking for when they came inside?

Mr. Peppers: Ah, cleanliness, and your procedures in bathing...testing the temperature [of the water].

Interviewer: What would happen if something was wrong, or if your water was too cold?

Mr. Peppers: Well, you was written up.

Interviewer: Where did the blacks...where were they allowed to bathe at?

Mr. Peppers: The only time when they had segregation...the Afro-Americans or blacks, whatever you want to call it, ah, they bathed either at the Pythian or [National] Baptist...that's the only choice they had.

Interviewer: Did the heat in the bathhouse ever bother you, or did you get used to it?

Mr. Peppers: Well, you never get used to it, but you learn to put up with it...

Interviewer: How did you find out about the bathhouses, how did you actually get started?

Mr. Peppers: Alroy Puckett told me that they needed someone to work at the Pythian, and that's how I got started.

Interviewer: Were physicals required at the time you were bath attendant, did you have to take a physical?

Mr. Peppers: Yeah, they were required. They've always been required...some people went to private doctors and others went down here to what they call the Libbey Memorial...

Interviewer: Now, when you became a bath attendant, did you have to go to school? I heard they had to go to school at that time?

Mr. Peppers: Yes, yes...at the Department of the Interior...I think about two weeks, morning and night. [to learn how to be a bath attendant].

Interviewer: Did bath attendants depend on tips [for their living]?

Mr. Peppers: Yes, they did...

Interviewer: Did you make good tips?

Mr. Peppers: Well, nothing; like I'd like to make, but you know, fair.

Oral Recollections of Ms. Claudine Adams

March 2, 1999 (this oral history is in the collection of Hot Springs National Park)

Ms. Adams was a bath attendant at the Arlington Hotel and Ozark Bathhouse in the mid-20th century.

Interviewer: Which bathhouse, or bathhouses, did you work in?

Ms. Adams: I'm the longest...I worked at the Arlington [Hotel], and then I worked in, with my aunt, at the Ozark for a short time, very short time, and then my mother, when she was ill. I worked in her place at the Superior, but I worked at the Arlington for thirty years.

Interviewer: What was your occupation at the Ozark? What did you do?

Ms. Adams: Oh, well, I was just filling in for as a helper...

Interviewer: When you went to the Arlington, what was your occupation?

Ms. Adams: I went in as a helper, but we had to work for about six months before we were eligible for tubs....at the meantime...in the summer I was off and so worked with my aunt at the Ozark, and then when my mother was ill, I went in the Superior with her, in her place as a bath attendant.

Interviewer: How did you get started in the bath industry?

Ms. Adams: Well, my aunt was head bath attendant at the Arlington, and she got me in, took me in under her wing.

Interviewer: Ms. Adams, were physicals required to be a bath attendant, did you have to take a physical every so often?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yeah...we had to go to the [Department of] Interior...at Libbey [Memorial]...we had to go every month.

Interviewer: Can you remember when you first started, were you paid by the bath, or were you paid by the bathhouse attendants?

Ms. Adams: ...the attendants paid us, helped us because we helped each individual attendant, and at that time, very little, I think were getting twenty cents a bath, and I think they gave us a nickel or something like that...but it was very little...

Interviewer: Did many bathers return year after year and ask for you?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yeah...after [I became] a bath attendant...we had regular customers that would come every year, and they would bring their friends. That's how you built a trade up, they would bring their friends with them and then they would bring their friends, you know, so it just went on round and round...

Interviewer: Did the heat ever bother you Ms. Adams?

Ms. Adams: No, it was very pleasant at the Arlington, but at the Ozark and those places, boy, you'd be wet time you get in there good, but at the Arlington, it was always very comfortable.

Interviewer: Were all [bath] attendants black [at the Ozark Bathhouse]?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yeah...

Interviewer: What about...did they have any masseuses or masseur, were they black?

Ms. Adams: Oh, no. They were mostly well, mostly white, all. Most all of them were white. I think there's a reason. I don't know, when they started, but they had colored after I left from up there...

Interviewer: When were the blacks allowed to bath along Bathhouse Row? Do you remember when they started letting blacks go to Bathhouse Row?

Ms. Adams: I don't know, I can't remember the year....

Interviewer: What kind of uniforms did you wear as bath attendants?

Ms. Adams: We wore white uniforms, like...nurses uniforms...white and...we had white tennis and white shoes. We all dressed in white.

Interviewer: Did you have name tags?

Ms. Adams: Yeah, we had badges. Mine was 711.

Interviewer: Did the 711 stand for anything?

Ms. Adams: No, it was just a lucky number. That was all.

Interviewer: Did the National Park inspectors come around to check the baths?

Ms. Adams: You didn't ever know when they were coming in. And when they would come, you'd have to be on your p's and q's at all times because the inspectors would come through every now and then...

Interviewer: When you were giving the baths, did you have problems with the individual thinking that taking the bath...they wanted the water hotter?

Ms. Adams: Sometimes you'd get cripples, or something like that, we had a hard time getting them in and out, but they had to have someone to help them, and...sometimes they'd want you to make the water hotter because it was from 98 to 100 degrees, and some of them would, "oh, that wasn't hot enough," you know...but we couldn't go over that [temperature].

Interviewer: Did you have some of them that heated it up when your back was turned?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yes, some of them would turn the faucets on. But we'd hear it and we'd come back and adjust it, readjust it...but it was just wonderful working up there. We were just like a happy family. There were eight attendants and five or six helpers, each attendant had a helper...there must have been four helpers or somebody, but anyway we just had a good time. It was just, we were together more than you were at home; tell you the truth, with your family...

Interviewer: You looked forward to going to work?

Ms. Adams: Oh yeah, and every morning at 6:20, we went down this hill. My husband and me were always there on, early. Even when they had the floods we were there before the waters come through. We got down at the Arlington, we had to take our shoes off to walk into the basement, but...a little water [was on] when we got there, we were there, in fact...another couple were there, and finally they had to send us home because of the water was contaminated...

Interviewer: Did you take baths yourselves?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yes, we took baths every day...at noon or after noon...sometimes before, it all depends on the time that you wanted to take, but you were allowed to always take baths. In fact, they always told you, you know, that was something you could do at any time. We didn't bathe when the people were there, but we'd bathe afterwards....

Interviewer: You had to work on Sundays?

Ms. Adams: On Sundays...the golfers, they would always come in the last minute and you couldn't leave until they were out, and sometimes...some of them were very unreasonable, they'd come at the last, one minute before closing time, and then you had to stay to see them out...

Interviewer: When the inspector was coming in...[did] they inspect to see if the tubs were clean?

Ms. Adams: Oh, they would, no, they would...at our place we never had enough worry like that, they would just see about the water...

Interviewer: Did you fill the tub after the bather was dried?

Ms. Adams: Oh, yeah, you would bathe half full, and when you put them, and they would send you Christmas cards, and little Christmas gifts...they were all very nice, as I said...I had one lady that ah' was kind of peculiar, she had breaking out all over her face an all, course makes you kind of skeptical about those kind of people, you know...but it was contagious. She had...to bring from the doctor [a note] that it wasn't contagious, but she was kinda of a peculiar woman anyway. And she wanted to be sure the tubs were clean, and you'd have to rescrub them after she come, you know. Oh, I was glad when she took someone else...

Interviewer: [During the bath] did you use any particular type of soap that you recall?

Ms. Adams: They furnished liquid soap, I've forgotten now what it was, but it was a kind of a greenish liquid soap. We always had plenty of soap on hand, only thing we didn't have, when I first when up there, you had a trouble with the towels. The people didn't bring towels, you would have a hard time, but lot of times people would leave the towels...that's how you got your supply of towels for the other people, and we'd always order the best [towels] they had down in the drugstore...good, nice towels that could hold the heat.

Interviewer: We understand that there was some labor problems...do you remember, recall any of those?

Ms. Adams: They tried to have a union, and we went to several meetings, but I don't know...it didn't work, and some were sorry later on it didn't work...

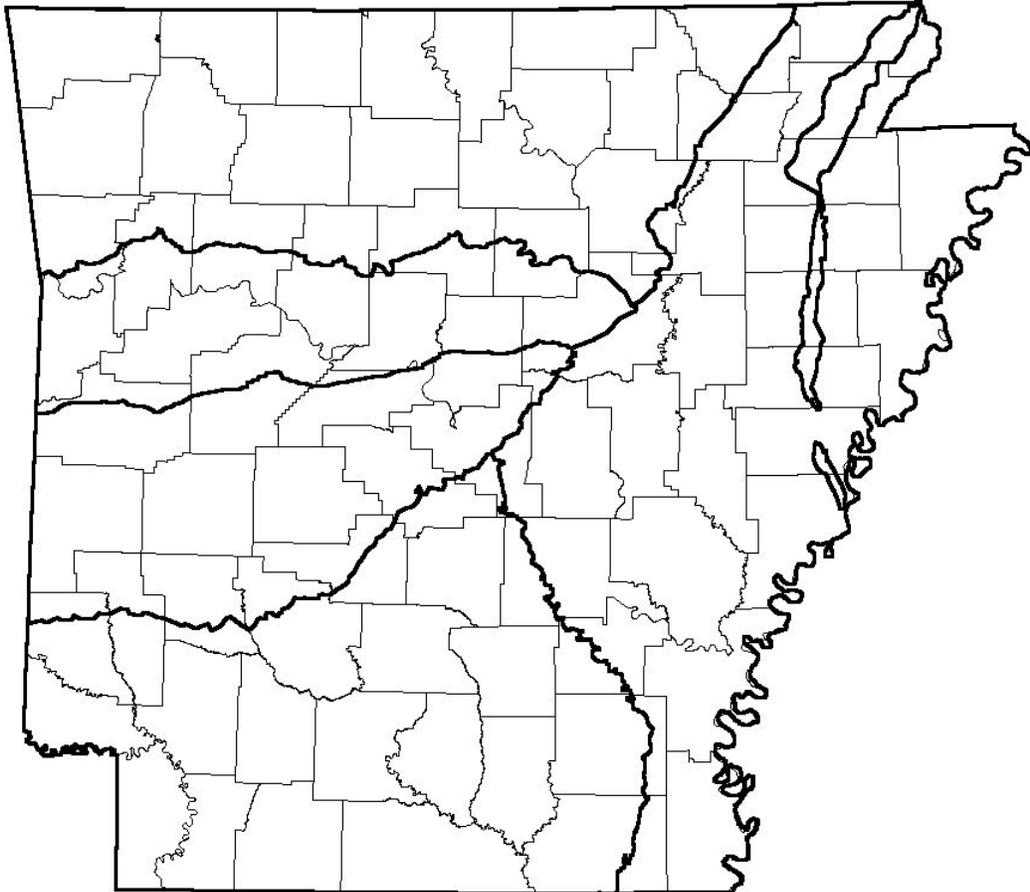
Interviewer: You made the statement that mostly all the bath attendants were black, and the masseurs and masseuses were white...

Ms. Adams: Yeah, and there was only one white bathhouse at that time, was the Buckstaff. [the Buckstaff only employed white workers]...it was dead discrimination... You was supposed to be in the back, you know, and the masseuses were in the front...but as a whole...all our attendants and helpers we...just enjoyed looking forward to coming to work...

Map of the continental USA



Map of Arkansas



Map of Hot Springs National Park

